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# HEY HEY! HO HO! WHERE DID RADICAL CHEERLEADERS GO?

by [Christine Ro \(/profile/christine-ro\)](#)

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Radical cheerleaders at a 2007 anti-war protest in Washington, DC. [Photo by Ben Schumin.](#)

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:S15\\_Radical\\_Cheerleading\\_1.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:S15_Radical_Cheerleading_1.jpg)

At the 2004 Republican National Convention demonstration in New York, someone handed the mic to Cara Jennings and asked her to perform a cheer. Ten years earlier, Cara and her sisters Aimee and Coleen formed the country's first radical cheerleading squad, writing and performing peppy chants with leftist lyrics. They'd performed all over the country, everywhere from protest marches to jail cells, but she usually didn't lead a cheer alone. "To my astonishment, after we took the mic

and called out the first line, ‘I don’t wanna work anymore,’ hundreds of people in the crowd called back the next line, ‘What did you say?,’ and then together we sang out the cheer: ‘The system doesn’t work anymore/ What did you say?!’”

The rest of the cheer, which Jennings had written with her sisters and fellow originators of radical cheerleading, ran:

“Sound off

I don’t wanna work anymore!

What did you say?

I said the system doesn’t work anymore!

What did you say?

I said STOMP, smash the state

Let’s liberate

Acknowledge me or go to hell

Another womyn to rebel

Stomp, smash the state

Let’s liberate

Organize and raise some hell

Act up, unite, REBEL!”

Clearly, this was no ordinary cheer. And radical cheerleading was no ordinary movement.





A radical cheerleading squad called the Resistin' Radicatz during 2004's Million Worker March.

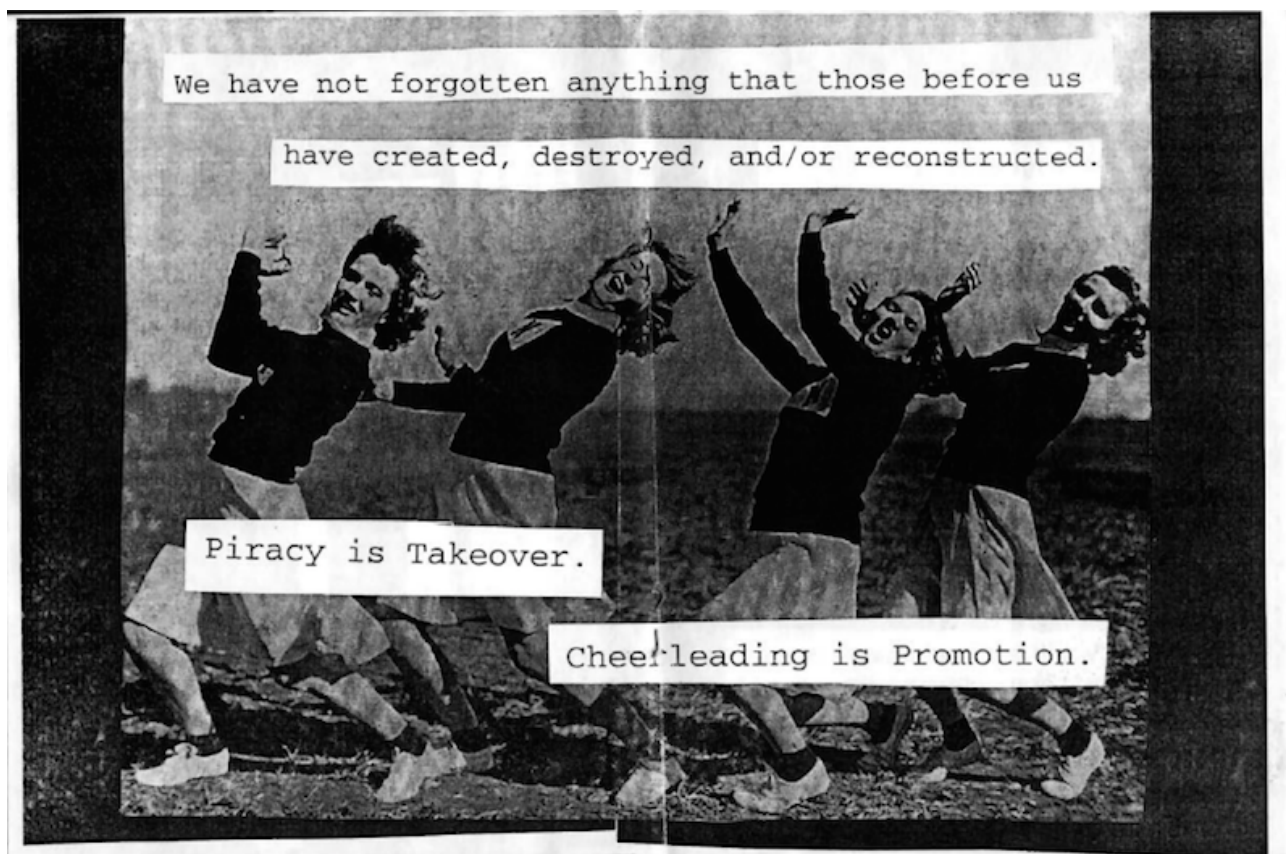
[Photo by Ben Schumin](#)

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Jennings and her sisters got the idea for radical cheerleading in 1996 during an anarchist convergence in Chicago that was being held as a counter-convention to the Democratic National Convention. “We witnessed inspiring street theater, brave street actions, and also noticed that men would commonly dominate the bullhorn leading repetitive, uninspired chants,” says Jennings. “We got to thinking about a street theater-like chanting group that would amplify the voices of women and queers.”

In the early 2000s, radical cheerleading [reached the peak of its cultural moment](http://www.newsweek.com/were-here-we-cheer-get-used-it-136589) (<http://www.newsweek.com/were-here-we-cheer-get-used-it-136589>). This was a form of ritualized political performance, where cheerleading squads in cities across North America (and later Europe) would protest injustices through cheers. Radical cheerleading had never centered on a specific set of demands: It was a protest tool that could be used to support a variety of progressive demands. Squads of people dressed as punk cheerleaders showed up at Pride parades, union picket lines, and environmental protests. Often they would reinterpret the symbols of cheerleading through an anarchic or alternative lens, such as making pom-poms out of plastic bags. Some squads had silly themes, like the [Milwaukee Pirate Cheerleaders](#)

(<http://www.talldadpictures.com/oldsite/pirates.html>). *Bitch* cofounder Lisa Jervis, in a speech at the [National Women's Studies Association in 2004](http://www.feminist.com/resources/artspeech/genwom/thirdwave.html) (<http://www.feminist.com/resources/artspeech/genwom/thirdwave.html>), referred to radical cheerleading as a playful exemplar of the pop culture-laced feminism of the day. "The 1968 Miss America protests defined the very start of the second wave, and their lineage extends to guerrilla theater groups like Ladies Against Women in the '80s and the [Radical Cheerleaders](http://radicalcheerleaders.net/) (<http://radicalcheerleaders.net/>) today." Jennings, looking back, refers to "the power of our movement to share stories, songs, and chants that build momentum and inspire action."



A page from the Milwaukee Pirate Cheerleaders' cheer zine, which was [archived by QZAP](http://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/116) ([http://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/116](http://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/116)) in 2003.

Laura Grindstaff, a sociology professor at the University of California, Davis who has studied cheerleading in both its radical and conventional forms extensively, tells me that radical cheerleaders "were appropriating a popular form of cheerleading." In the 1990s, cheerleading was becoming more of a sport in its own right—one that was more athletic and more competitive. The first Cheerleading World Championships were held in 2001. Yet the popular image of cheerleading was still very much of the minimally dressed female cheerleader on the sidelines of a male sports event. This was the image radical cheerleaders seized upon in order to subvert gender messages while serving up peppy support for social justice causes.



In the late 20th century, cheerleaders became emblems of mainstream femininity—in our pop culture, cheerleaders are often depicted as pretty, not-very-bright girls whose main passion is cheering on boys. But cheerleading was primarily a male activity for most of its history (<http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/americas/2012/03/>). Cheerleading grew out of U.S. military sports; injured players and substitutes would lead cheers from the bench. According to The Berkshire Encyclopedia of World Sport, in the early 1900s, sports teams created the role of “yell leader”—a prestigious position comparable to the quarterback on the football team. Women didn’t start cheerleading until the 1920s, and many female cheerleaders at the time were considered unfeminine—Harvard didn’t even allow female cheerleaders until 1971. Particularly after World War II, with the influx of women on college campuses, cheerleading became the highly gendered, highly sexualized activity it is today.

In the late ‘90s, the increasingly competitive nature of cheerleading coincided with a boom in pop culture portrayals of the sport. Comedian Cheri Oteri brought her Spartan Cheerleader character to Saturday Night Live. The original Bring It On movie was released in 2000, ushering in a decade of guilty-pleasure cheerleader movies. The English band The Go! Team made a splash in 2004 with the release of their debut album. It featured an unexpected combination of cheerleader-type chants with a very-2000s mix of hip hop sampling and indie rock. As cheerleading became more prominent in our pop culture, the satirical practice of radical cheerleading grew, too. As radical cheerleader Mary Christmas explained in a 2004 interview ([http://www.hemisphericinstitute.org/journal/1\\_1/cheerleaders.html](http://www.hemisphericinstitute.org/journal/1_1/cheerleaders.html)), radical cheerleading brought together body-positive politics, femme identity, and activism: “It’s a sensibility, like femme, it is more than just expression with a feminine twist. It’s more than just girly-ness and more than just feminism. It’s trying to reclaim everything that’s been taken away from you.”



Radical cheerleaders at a 2007 anti-war protest. [Photo by Sage Ross.](#)

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Radical\\_cheerleaders\\_at\\_September\\_15\\_anti-war\\_protest.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Radical_cheerleaders_at_September_15_anti-war_protest.jpg)

But barring a brief resurgence in the early 2010s, radical cheerleading has pretty much died out. It's rare to see radical cheerleaders at protests or parades these days. Photocopied [zines of cheers are now housed in archives](#) ([http://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/164](http://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/164))—which is good, since the main digital hubs of the movement, [radicalcheerleading.net](http://radicalcheerleading.net) and [radicalcheer.org](http://radicalcheer.org), have lapsed. Other political movements came to the fore.

One of the most recently active groups is Boston Sass Attack, which was performing up until a couple of years ago. The group's cofounder, whose cheer name was Momma Sass, [focused on consent](http://bostonsassattack.org/meet-the-squad/moma-sass/) (<http://bostonsassattack.org/meet-the-squad/moma-sass/>) in her personal cheer:

“Hey my name is Momma Sass, you know what I’ve got?  
I’ve got a message that’s hotter than hott!  
Consent is sexy, find out what they prefer!  
‘May I please blank your blank?’ Ask your partner!  
Ask your partner! Ask-ask your partner!”

Momma Sass (whose real name is Libby Mae Collins) notes that radical cheerleading played an important part in her political progression. This education was logistical,

as she learned how to mobilize people with different amounts of free time and commitment. And it was strategic, like being pushed by the minority voices on the squad to be more aware of the composition of the group. “Cheerleading was something that made me grow a lot politically and made me think about how to be the best organizer and best accomplice to communities that I’m not a part of,” she explains.

Collins, like many other radical cheerleaders, speaks frankly about this particular limitation of the movement. Grindstaff notes that while Black women have historically had higher rates of participation in cheerleading than white women, interlocking issues of race, class, and gender reversed this trend as cheerleading became more organized. Radical cheerleading had similar problems. Because so many of the squads developed through social networks, they reflected the lack of diversity of the campuses and other places where they originated.



A page from a 1999 cheer zine printed by Santa Cruz's radical cheerleading squad. [The zine is archived by QZAP \(http://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/164\).](http://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/164)



While radical cheerleading squads were often not very racially diverse, they were very inclusive of different gender and sexual identities—so much so that some radical cheerleaders joked about a chronic absence of straight women on the squads. And the abundance of women allowed for a contrast to what Grindstaff calls the “aggro activism” that often excluded women. As Momma Sass says of her post-cheerleading activism, “When I went to Occupy, I was like, who are all these fucking bros? ... It felt like such a man party.”

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Jennings explains her own turning point: “I started to feel uncomfortable turning complex issues into sound bites and taking up space as a radical cheerleader at protests. Instead of taking center stage or leading the chant at the front of the blockade, I began to fill other roles.”

So what happened to the other radical cheerleaders? Many of the most active cheerleaders are still involved in social justice work, broadly speaking. Jennings is a union worker and former city commissioner who [went viral in April](http://www.dailydot.com/irl/cara-jennings-interview-story-behind-viral-rick-scott-vid/) (<http://www.dailydot.com/irl/cara-jennings-interview-story-behind-viral-rick-scott-vid/>) after telling off Florida Governor Rick Scott in a Starbucks for his defunding of Planned Parenthood. An [article about the incident appeared on the Daily Dot](http://www.dailydot.com/irl/cara-jennings-interview-story-behind-viral-rick-scott-vid/) (<http://www.dailydot.com/irl/cara-jennings-interview-story-behind-viral-rick-scott-vid/>), and the writer who reported on the encounter is a former radical cheerleader, too.

Momma Sass is now a doula committed to reproductive justice, particularly for queer and low-income people. Her Boston Sass Attack cofounder works with [Black and Pink](http://www.blackandpink.org/) (<http://www.blackandpink.org/>), an advocacy group for LGBTQ prisoners. Two members of the Milwaukee Pirate Cheerleaders went on to cofound a feminist bookshop. One of them is now a refugee case manager and organizer for [Sex Ed for Adults](https://sexedforadults.wordpress.com/) (<https://sexedforadults.wordpress.com/>); the other works for an organization that combats domestic and sexual violence and trafficking.

These snapshots, from just one political movement, show that feminist progressivism takes many faces in many different worlds: academia, women’s services, government, campaigning, media, and more.

Jennings notes that this progressivism is a natural link to radical cheerleading and that its ethos hasn't disappeared. As she says, "I would not say that I stopped cheerleading, as being a radical cheerleader was not just about jumping into formation and putting on a show. It was more about a creative way to engage bystanders with our message, to keep our fellow protestors' spirits up and to cheer on our activist team. I have continued to do those things, as many other radical cheerleaders have, just not with pom-poms."

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